

Click Here to Save the World? Rethinking Slacktivism and Digital Participation

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Cast your mind back to the morning of March 5th, 2012 and you may recall that your Facebook and Twitter feeds looked slightly different than normal. Gone were the usual mix of selfies, cringeworthy status updates, and monochrome photographs of food/babies/cats (delete as appropriate). Instead users were inundated with link to a 30 minute campaign video entitled “[Kony 2012](#)”. Produced by the American NGO Invisible Children, the video was part of a campaign to raise awareness of the atrocities committed by Ugandan rebel Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army, and to increase pressure on the United States federal government to ramp up their efforts to capture Kony. The video became a [viral phenomenon](#), taking just six days to reach 100 million views. It is also the archetypal example of slacktivism, a pejorative term that has recently emerged in popular commentary about the internet and politics.

Slacktivism refers to low-threshold forms of political engagement online, such as signing an e-petition, clicking like on a Facebook page, or changing one’s profile picture on Twitter in support of a cause. [Henrik Christensen](#) has identified two key components of the critique. Firstly, that low effort forms of online engagement are less effective than offline methods and, secondly, that this is of paramount concern due to the substitution thesis in which digital activism is replacing tried-and-tested offline participation; activists become slacktivists when they fulfil their need for political involvement with a few simple clicks. It creates an illusion that a user is having a meaningful political impact, with potentially stark consequences for the power dynamics between political elites and the public.

Popularised by the likes of [Malcolm Gladwell](#) and [Evgeny Morozov](#), the term has increasingly gained prominence within academic, journalistic, and activist circles. For example, last year the Swedish division of Unicef launched a campaign deriding the practice, arguing that “[likes don’t save lives](#)”. The term has become synonymous with a negative perception of the political value of social media.

If slacktivism is replacing the conventional forms of political participation, have we all become narcissistic zombies? Do the latest generation of political activists simply share, like, and sign e-petitions like a zombie with no real thought? I argue that this is not the case. The slacktivist critique lacks an appreciation for the complexity of how citizens use social media for political means on a day-to-day basis. Instead the critique refers to specific examples to support vague, grand theories of internet usage where none can be made.

Firstly, the critique evaluates the relationship between acts of so-called slacktivism and the desired political outcome in isolation. It implies that easy online actions, like sharing a tweet, form a causal relationship with the desired political effect. However, in doing so this

ignores the complex array of factors that result in any political outcome. Focusing on the relationship in this way lacks an appreciation of the procedural foundations at the heart of political engagement. By thinking of participation as a process, a new set of questions emerge regarding the value of social media as a tool for deepening knowledge, for political discussion, and for public forms of symbolic self-expression.

Secondly, in order to critically evaluate the role of social media on political engagement, we must first develop a comprehensive awareness of the media environment in which such usage takes place. The slacktivist critique focuses on social media in isolation, falling foul of what [Nathan Jurgenson](#) describes as digital dualism; the belief that online and offline are distinct and separate realities. Digital micro-activism often makes up just a single tactic in the vast strategic repertoire of online and offline techniques. By focusing on one social-networking site or one event we ignore the relationships formed between symbolic, expressive digital micro-activism and other forms of online and offline engagement.

Furthermore, the slacktivist critique also ignores the impact of media convergence on information consumption and interpersonal discussion. This is problematic as everyday political experience is fundamentally diffuse; “[people don’t discuss politics in one place or using one technology](#)”. What happens before and after instances of collective - or what [Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg](#) describe as connective - action? Our actions online are not isolated but influence our political attitudes and behaviours in other online and offline spaces.

Thirdly, a central theme of the slacktivist critique is effort. Slacktivism is often deemed as a “lazy person’s activism”, as activists abandon effort-intensive, on-the-ground political action in favour of easier methods online. However, what does effort mean in this context? If we turn to the Oxford Dictionary [definition of slacktivism](#), it is apparent that effort is synonymous with time. This suggests that the depth of someone’s commitment to a cause, or the quality of democratic engagement at the micro-level, can be measured by time. However, it is dangerous to simply assume that the more time a citizen devotes to politics, the more impactful their actions will be, and it is unrealistic to claim that active citizenship requires such high levels of commitment.

If we consider the time pressure that individual’s experience on a daily basis, then the [granularity of digital engagement](#) represents an important means of maintaining awareness, keeping a toe in the water so to speak, sometimes sparking further involvement at opportune moments. In particular, the granular nature of digital activism may lower the threshold for involvement for those citizens who have become marginalised or excluded. Therefore it is important to examine the context in which these apparent “quick fixes” take place.

If we return to the example of Kony 2012 we can see how it actually alluded to some interesting themes. It evidently provided evidence of the potential of mass political mobilisation online. The granular campaign did not offer a way out for those taking part but instead lowered the threshold of involvement. Even though the campaign was undoubtedly problematic (and then some), the conversations and critiques that followed acted as a mass learning experience in which citizens were exposed to a vast array of political information from journalists, but also [academics](#) and [citizen bloggers](#). These have important attitudinal and behavioural implications if we consider participation as a process.

By contrast slacktivism refers to just a tiny proportion of actions that are in no way indicative of how one's use of social media may benefit, or harm, their understanding and engagement with politics. Scale and context are crucial to understanding political behaviour. The slacktivist critique narrowly focuses on micro-activism in isolation, ignoring each act's relationship to other forms of communication and possible engagement. It is in these interactions that we will discover more substantive findings. In doing so we can see how these acts can be deeply meaningful forms of democratic engagement. Be it in raising public awareness and securing the attention of broadcast media, such as in the ongoing [#bringbackourgirls campaign](#) launched in response to the abduction of 257 Nigerian schoolgirls, or as part of a repertoire of political actions that lead to real space mobilisation, as shown by the campaigning organisation [38 Degrees](#).

Biography

[James Dennis](#) is a PhD student and tutor based in the [New Political Communication Unit](#) in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London. The working title for his PhD is "It's Better to Light a Candle than to Fantasise About a Sun": Exploring Social Media, Political Participation and Slacktivism. This blog is based on his recent paper presented at the PSA annual conference in Manchester. He tweets [@dennisdcfc](#).